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CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN VISUAL EXPERIENCE

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The picture was the key. Or it seemed like a key.
Zettel §240

INTRODUCTION

The argument I wish to develop describes one of the threads of continuity throughout Wittgenstein's work. Evidence for it may be found in his memorable use of visual analogy, for example of "seeing an aspect" through the duck-rabbit of the Investigations¹. These analogies might be regarded as illustrations in two ways. Often they appear as literal illustrations, as drawings within the text. Others serve to illustrate the text by adding an accompanying example to what has previously been discussed. This latter type of illustration need not be a drawing or even a visual analogy. Any analogy, visual or non-visual, could be said to illustrate the text in this sense. Anthony Kenny describes the same process whilst asserting Wittgenstein's rejection of mental images:

[4]

Of course it is true that often as we talk mental images pass through our minds but it is not they which confer meanings on the words which we use it is rather the other way around. The images are like the pictures illustrating the text in a book. It is no more necessary in order to understand a sentence that one should imagine anything in connection with it than that one should make a sketch from it².

I shall distinguish three uses of visual experience by Wittgenstein. The first in which a visual example, such as the duck-rabbit, can also illustrate the text. The second, the sense in which a non-visual example can "illustrate" a text, for example by analogy. The third in which the utility of both these types of illustration serves to describe an underlying process. This is a secondary level of description based on the very possibility of illustration. Its inexpressible connection with what is illustrated leads me to describe it

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1. Wittgenstein (1967) Philosophical Investigations, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, p.194. ff.
 2. Kenny (1975) Wittgenstein p.147; cf. PI I-396.

as a metaphor. I shall discuss this third sense within the context of a study of the other two.

As I am seeking one of the threads of continuity in Wittgenstein I shall take examples from both the Tractatus and the Investigations. In each case I shall describe a visual illustration including diagrams, and a non-visual illustration. I shall also mention an example from the middle writings.

THE TRACTATUS

There are three visual illustrations in the form of diagrams in the Tractatus. I shall discuss the diagrammatic illustration of the eye and the visual field³. There are three points to be made about this example. Firstly, it illustrates the argument of the location of the metaphysical self by analogy. That the form of the argument is an analogy is clearly demonstrated by the statement: [5]

this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field⁴.

The four terms of the analogy are therefore: the world and the metaphysical self; the visual field and the eye.

Secondly, there is also a sub-argument which relates to the analogy of the visual field and not to the main argument of the metaphysical self. This sub-argument is presented in the form of a diagram with the accompanying text:

For the form of the visual field is surely not like this⁵.

Thus by arguing against the suggestion that the eye is related to the visual field in the way that is represented in the diagram in 5.6331, Wittgenstein concludes that neither is the metaphysical self so related to the world⁶.

3. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, translated by Pears and McGuinness, 5.6331.

4. 5.633.

5. 5.6331.

6. 5.64.

Thirdly, whether the relationship of the eye to the visual field is analogous to the relationship of the metaphysical subject to the world, is not capable of verification. Neither is it substantiated by other statements of the text. It may only be seen from the diagram that if the visual field is defined as something akin to what is seen by my eye then it is true that my eye does not form part of my visual field. The solipsistic fact that the metaphysical self is not part of the world may be seen from the text⁷. Thus there is little in the terms of the analogy that independently substantiates the argument which the illustration itself is supposed to describe. If the diagram has any significance then the principal term in need of clarification is "visual field", whether this has the relationship to the eye which is represented, and therefore whether this is the relationship of the corresponding metaphysical self to the world.

[6]

I agree with Maury⁸ that there are two uses of the term "visual field". The common usage refers to what is seen at a particular moment.

A description of what you see is a description of the 'visual field'
(although that way of putting it is already to strain ordinary
language)

However, he reads into Wittgenstein's usage, a different criterion. For example, that as nouns are the names of objects but that these objects are constructs of varied sense-data, to describe an object as an element of the visual field will not do. So to properly describe what belongs to the visual field one must describe only visual objects, that is, shapes or colours and their relationships.

If one accepts Wittgenstein's criterion of excluding named objects and only admitting descriptions of "visual objects" then a diagrammatic representation fulfils the requirement. But 5.6331 is not intended to show the contents of the visual field, but to show the relationship of the visual field to what lies outside it, i.e. the seeing eye. What needs to be

7. 5.6 - 5.632.

8. Maury (1989) "The Structure of the Visual Field", p.3. Paper presented to the 14th International Wittgenstein Symposium.

demonstrated is that the eye cannot be part of its own visual field in Wittgenstein's terms.

The following was written approximately 12 years after 5.6331. However I believe that it does provide an insight into Wittgenstein's analogy.

There isn't an eye belonging to me and eyes belonging to others in visual space. Only the space itself is asymmetrical, the objects in it are on a par. In the space of physics however this presents itself in such a way that one of the eyes which are on a par is singled out and called *my eye*⁹.

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To this extent the diagram is a representation of a concept. That concept is that there is a bounded area seen by the eye. It includes everything that may be seen at one moment. The boundary cannot be seen as it forms a limit to the possibility of seeing. The diagram represents an interpretation of the limits which we cannot see. The same objection applies here as was levelled by Russell¹⁰, that Wittgenstein has said something about what he also asserts is unsayable. Likewise the role of the boundary in this arrangement is an inference. We are not aware of seeing it with our eyes. As the diagram represents a concept, it must be interpreted correctly.

I have treated this visual example from the Tractatus in some detail because I wish to establish the relationship of the analogy to the text which it illustrates. In subsequent examples I will describe a relationship where the parallel nature of analogy gives way to a more fragmentary form of illustration.

My non-visual example from the Tractatus derives from the picture theory. It is non-visual, despite being part of the "picture" theory in the sense that a

9. Philosophical Remarks VII 73.
cf. Lee (1980) Wittgenstein's Lectures 1930-1932 p.81.

10. Introduction to Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, translated by Pears and McGuinness, p.xxi.

gramophone record is a picture of the music it reproduces¹¹. Whilst a gramophone record has a visual aspect it is not a picture of the music by virtue of this aspect. What does make it a picture of the music, and my non-visual example, is the relationship between its pictorial form and the logical form of the music. This relationship is exemplified by the possibility of connecting the picture with what it represents by lines of projection¹².

What is characteristic of the picture theory is that the picture goes proxy for what it represents by virtue of it having this parallel structure. This structure is not itself a subject of

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the picture. Though the relationship of a picture to what it represents may be represented in another picture, it is impossible that the fact that a picture is so related is represented in the picture itself. This is Hintikka's ineffability thesis¹³ and the foundation of the doctrine of showing. Showing is also part of my third use of illustration.

The connection to the subject is again by analogy. I identified three principal elements in the structure of the analogy of the eye and the visual field. These elements can again be identified in the picture theory. First, the theory is a representation of a concept, in the way that the diagram visualises the visual field. Second, the limits of that concept are not capable of being understood. In terms of the picture theory this describes the ineffability of representing the subject of the picture and the means by which that picture represents its subject¹⁴. Third, that the perceiving subject is an inference in this representation in the same way as is the boundary. This too is implied in the picture theory as the necessity of using analogy to explain the fact of solipsism.

So we bring forward a set of concepts which include that of picturing.

11. 4.014.

12. cf. Zettel 291.

13. Hintikka (1989) Investigating Wittgenstein Chapter 1.

14. 2.171 and 2.172.

Picturing in the sense of the Tractatus is a technical term. It does not only include pictures and diagrams. Propositions are also pictures of what they signify. Anything which represents something else does so by having a specific relationship to it. This is a projection relationship whereby elements of the picture, in whatever form, can be mapped onto elements of what is signified¹⁵. I have maintained that pictures are therefore analogous to what they represent because the internal relations of the picture to the pictured are the same as the internal relations of an analogy. This set of analogies is described in terms of the

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metaphor of visual picturing. This visual basis also supports the concept of showing.

MIDDLE WRITINGS

In recognition of the fact that the middle writings are often overlooked I have chosen to make a brief reference to one visual example from The Blue Book. It is the ostensive definition of the fictional word "tove"¹⁶. The word is explained by pointing to a pencil and saying "this is tove", or "this is called tove". The reference of the gesture of pointing must then be interpreted and the association made between the word and the referent. The visual element is the accompanying gesture by which the definition reaches out into the world.

The paradigm case of definition by ostension is the definition of words referring to first person sensory experience, for example colour-words. These words are not capable of verbal definition. If ostension was an example of the fundamental point at which language reaches rock-bottom and explanation comes to end, then the ostensive definition of colour-words would be an example of the explanation of meaning. One of only three diagrams in The Blue Book shows the visual experience corresponding to the game of geometrical proof¹⁷. This diagram is used to demonstrate, not

15. cf. Zettel 291.

16. p.2.

17. The Blue Book p.68.

just to illustrate. It is an ostensive definition of what it is to prove the geometrical thesis.

However, the discussion of ostension in The Blue Book is given in order to discredit the concept that ostension holds a special place as an explanation. Because of the lack of specification of the category of the referent, what is being explained remains ambiguous. Ostension is therefore not presented as any form of explanation but as an illustration of what could be an explanation of meaning. The accompanying text makes clear that whilst it could be an explanation of meaning it is not so.

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THE INVESTIGATIONS

In the Philosophical Investigations it is much more difficult to separate the concept of visual experience as an analogy from the concept of visual experience as something more integral with understanding. Thus non-visual arguments, such as the private-language argument, are found to have visual elements, such as the beetle-in-a-box illustration¹⁸. However it is no longer the case that the beetle-in-a-box illustration is analogous to the private language argument, but rather that seeing the aspect which makes the beetle-in-a-box argument into an argument is the same as seeing the aspect which will make the private language argument into an argument. There is no paralleling here as there is in analogy. The aspect which must be seen is the same and of course this seeing an aspect is developed explicitly in Part II of the Investigations. Despite the chronological gap between Parts I and II the integration of visual experience into the whole structure of understanding the meaning of a word develops progressively.

The discussion of seeing an aspect in Part II is crucial to the argument of the rest of the book. This discussion of aspects is introduced by the visual example of seeing aspects of the duck-rabbit drawing. Seeing an aspect in this sense, in the literal sense if seeing as part of visual experience, is a combination of seeing and thinking¹⁹. The visual experience offers a

18. Philosophical Investigations I-293.

19. p.197.

paradigm of "grasping the meaning of a word". When one looks at the duck-rabbit one sees a continuous unchanging figure. However the interpretation of that figure as a duck or as a rabbit changes one's experience of the meaning of the drawing. One has something in addition: the meaning. Concepts such as aspect-blindness and hence of meaning-blindness are introduced here.

[11]

The importance of this concept lies in the connection between the concepts of "seeing an aspect" and "experiencing the meaning of a word"²⁰.

The discussion of aspects through the visual example of the duck-rabbit is itself an example of the style of the *Investigations*. The whole book consists of a series of illustrations, both visual and non-visual, which show that certain supposed concepts are confused, for example, that meaning is not a mental image which accompanies our understanding. In accordance with his determination to avoid a general theory these examples interrupt our usual way of thinking by providing paradoxical consequences. However, it is crucial that we see in what way these examples are paradoxical, for they are not logically so. They illustrate an aspect which must be seen to have a family resemblance to the concepts with which we are supposed to be more familiar. Thus in reading the *Investigations* we must apply the method which is being presented in the book. The validity of the method is assumed, and not argued for, in the book.

I claimed above that the beetle-in-the-box argument was a visual element of the private language argument rather than an analogy. What I have in mind is as follows. It would be wrong to interpret the beetle-in-a-box argument as evoking as an illustration a group of people who have a box in which is a beetle. As nobody can look into another's box the possibility of the box being empty is explicitly stated. So what, if anything, is in the box cannot form one side of an analogous explanation. It is not even the case that what is in the box is unknown. The concept of what is in the box is meaningless

20. *Philosophical Investigations* p.214.

because there is no community of users, only private users. Therefore we cannot stand outside the example and know the truth of what is in the box, and therefore the true meaning of the word "beetle".

[12]

The beetle-in-a-box argument does have a use however, though not as an analogy. If we can see the aspect which makes this illustration meaningless we can see the concept behind the impossibility of private languages. But because we are at the limit of our form of life or form of understanding, we cannot force that aspect onto an unseeing subject. This is described within the aspect seeing discussion as the instruction "Now see this leaf green". The difference is between reporting my perception of a simple figure and reporting a new perception when I realise the ambiguity of aspects.

SUMMARY

The Visual Discontinuity Thesis.

It is not difficult to find discontinuity in the use of visual examples across Wittgenstein's writings. In the Tractatus examples such as the eye and the visual field describe a condition in which boundaries are identified. These are the boundaries of what can be seen, literally in this case, by the eye. It parallels the condition of a boundary to what can meaningfully be said. The visual example is somewhat secondary to the assertion relationship of the analogy:

This is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field²¹.

In the later writings the illustrations have a denial relationship to the text:

Above all do not say "After all my visual impression isn't the *drawing*; it is *this* - which I can't show to anyone"²²

21. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 5.6331.

22. Philosophical Investigations p.196.

The temptation to believe that the illustration could be an alternative form of explanation has been massaged away. Similarly the accompanying gesture to the ostensive definition of

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"tove" does not serve to explain. Nor, with the duck-rabbit is one presented with an illustration of the process of understanding the meaning of a word. There is no way of using the duck-rabbit to illustrate the dual aspect to a subject who is aspect-blind. Across all the works there is therefore considerable discontinuity both in the nature of the examples and their relationship to the text.

The Visual Continuity Thesis

A secondary language-game.

The Visual Continuity Thesis constitutes my third use of the term illustration. Formerly I described illustration as a literal illustration, a diagram or described visual example. I also described a second use when any example or analogy is added to a text. The Visual Continuity Thesis is, however, a depth-grammar. Hintikka has already advanced a thesis that there are primary and secondary language-games in the Investigations. I do not believe that my thesis uses the same categorisation as does Hintikka, but I do claim that there are two parallel conceptions involved. The surface-grammar provides a series of provocative but discontinuous visual analogies for the way in which visual experience illustrates how language is related to the world. This surface-grammar or primary language-game of visual experience changes across Wittgenstein's works as his approach to the explanation of the relationship of language to the world itself changes. Unlike the surface-grammar, the depth-grammar does not change. This secondary language-game is the disclosure in retrospect of the family resemblance between all cases of understanding what one sees and of understanding the meaning of a word.

Behind the analogies, behind definition by ostension and behind seeing an aspect there is a family of concepts of understanding. These concepts do not have other concepts, such as the mental-image model, mediating between them and the

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world. In the Tractatus it appears as the concept of showing. It cannot be expressed, it is an aspect which must be seen. It is parallel to the method of understanding by explication in words. In this early work one can state that this explanation is ineffable. In the middle writings it appears as the "grasping" intuition of the connection between an object or quality and a word ostensibly taught. Once again it is part of the family of "seeing the connection" but this intuition is inexplicable. The family is finally identified, in the inexplicable sense in which various types of games are identified, in the Investigations. Part II describes the illusiveness of the family members as an illustration of "seeing-as". The visual basis of seeing an aspect thus provides a metaphor for the process of connecting meaning with a word. The metaphor is as implicit in showing as it is in seeing-as. It does not require that only visual experiences have a commonality. It does require that the process of understanding or of making the connection between a word and its meaning has at all times been rooted in our non-linguistic visual practice.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia el papel de la experiencia visual en la obra de Wittgenstein. La tesis específica consiste en que la experiencia visual no da únicamente ejemplos ilustrativos de lo que podría ser una explicación del significado, sino también una metáfora repetida de todo el proceso del significado y del entendimiento.

Wittgenstein utiliza un gran número de ejemplos visuales en sus textos. La diversidad de ellos puede explicarse por la gran variación de opciones que tiene para describir la relación entre una palabra y su significado. La variedad de ejemplos visuales que resulta se podría resumir en lo que llamo la Tesis de la Discontinuidad Visual.

Sin embargo, esta diversidad tiene en el fondo una línea continua, que se da mediante el uso persistente de la experiencia visual en la descripción de la relación palabra-significado. Este uso es la base de la relación de proyección del *Tractatus* y la relación de "ver-como" de *Investigations*. Esta metáfora visual se puede resumir en lo que llamo la Tesis de Continuidad Visual. Este artículo expone la última tesis en el contexto de una descripción de la tesis anterior.

[Traducción de Gisela Hummelt N.]

ABSTRACT [English abstract not published in original edition]

This paper investigates the role of visual experience in Wittgenstein's work. The specific thesis is that visual experience provides not only diverse illustrative examples of what could be an explanation of meaning, but that it also provides a recurrent metaphor for the whole process of meaning and understanding.

Wittgenstein uses a great number of visual examples in his texts. Their diversity may be accounted for by the great diversity of ways in which he attempts to describe the relationship between a word and its meaning. The resultant variety of visual examples may be summarised by what I call the Visual Discontinuity Thesis.

However, beneath this diversity there lies a thread of continuity. This is provided by the persistent use of visual experience in the description of the word-meaning relation. This use underlies the projection relationship of the *Tractatus* and the "seeing-as" relationship of the *Investigations*. This recurrent visual metaphor may be summarised by what I call the Visual Continuity Thesis. This paper presents the latter thesis in the context of a description of the former.